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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: A COMPLICATED CASE - TWO COSTA RICANS IN MEXICAN
PROSTITUTION RING

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: On June 8, Mexican police conducted a prostitution/potential-TIP raid in the Yucatan region where they found two Costa Rican women who allegedly had been brought to Mexico for use in a prostitution ring. While both women initially claimed that they had been trafficked to Mexico and kept against their will for use in forced prostitution, one of the women later admitted to Costa Rican authorities that they had gone to Mexico willingly with the express purpose of working in the sex industry. Costa Rican authorities are continuing to investigate the incident, including whether there is a wider prostitution-recruitment ring operating in Costa Rica. The two women were returned to Costa Rica on June 13, and given protection and support from the Victims Protection Office, which was officially established by law in Costa Rica in April 2009. END SUMMARY.

A STORY - AND A RETRACTION

12. (SBU) On June 8, a police patrol in the northern Yucatan encountered Raquel Canales Acevedo, who told them that she and a friend had been trafficked into Mexico, were being held against their will in a nearby house, and were being used as sexual slaves. Mexican authorities then followed Canales to the house, "freed" the second Costa Rican (Yoheni Chaves Fonseca), and arrested Rosa Maria Casanova May, a Mexican national. Casanova implicated Keisy Gonzalez, a Costa Rican national, as the leader of the prostitution ring. The two victims also told authorities that an official from the Yucatan State migration department, Hernan Vega Burgos, had assisted the ring in exchange for sexual favors. Mexican authorities are reportedly continuing their investigation into Vega's actions (he resigned his post on June 11) and are searching for Gonzalez, a long-time resident of Mexico.

13. (SBU) According to Michael Soto, head of the GOCR Judicial Police's "Various Crimes" unit which runs trafficking investigations, Chaves stated that she wanted to "set the record straight" as soon as she was returned to Costa Rica. Chaves told investigators that she had actually been recruited to go to Mexico by Canales in order to work as a prostitute, and that the two women had not in fact been held against their will while in Mexico. Chaves said that after arriving in Mexico, Canales disagreed with their employers (including over the use of the washing machine) and became dissatisfied with her pay. Chaves added that Canales was considering taking a position at another brothel when police found her, and that she invented the story regarding their alleged trafficking due to her personal disagreements with Gonzalez and Casanova. Soto told us that Canales has refused to speak with investigators, and is seeking out a defense attorney (despite the fact that the police have not brought charges against her). Soto also stated that the GOCR is investigating the 'massage parlor' where the women had

worked in Costa Rica before going to Mexico in order to determine if a wider prostitution-recruitment ring exists in Costa Rica. They are aware of at least one other Costa Rican who worked at Gonzalez's brothel in Mexico (for roughly one month) and returned to the Costa Rica around the time Canales and Chaves arrived in Mexico.

VICTIM'S PROTECTION OFFICE SPRINGS INTO ACTION

14. (SBU) Upon their return to Costa Rica, Canales and Chaves were put under the protection of the Victims Protection Office (VPO), which was officially established by the new Victim and Witness Protection Act of April 2009. Though not every tool called for in the Act has been put in place (including the construction of dedicated shelters for trafficking victims), the GOCR acted quickly and efficiently to provide protection to these two possible victims. The women were met at the airport by GOCR officials and members of the inter-agency TIP Coalition, including a psychologist. Both women were given police protection for roughly 15 days, until both decided that they no longer needed/wanted the protection. Both women were also offered regular visits with a psychologist for as long as they wished (which they used for a limited period of time). The VPO also set up one of the women with a foundation that would provide her funds to rent an apartment for a month, after she had difficulties re-establishing her ties with her family upon returning to Costa Rica.

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MEDIA COVERAGE

15. (SBU) The case was widely reported in the Costa Rican and Mexican press in mid-June. Both women were clearly identified by name, with their photos lining the pages of various Costa Rican newspapers. The Costa Rican press also listed detailed descriptions of the locations of their residences, including specific neighborhoods. After their return, and in large part due to the media coverage which failed to keep their identities confidential, both women have faced a number of challenges in re-integrating into their communities and with their families.

COMMENT

16. (SBU) This case has brought to light some of the major challenges of dealing with trafficking cases in Costa Rica, but also showed the seriousness with which the GOCR now takes potential TIP cases. All parties readily admit that there remains much work to be done on TIP issues, including Soto and Vice-Minister of Public Security (Government) Ana Duran, whose Ministry is responsible for handling the local TIP response. However, in this instance the GOCR and the TIP Coalition moved quickly to assist the two women from the moment they arrived in Costa Rica. The full funding of the Victims Protection Office, as expected in next year's budget, the establishment of victims shelters, and the drafting and passage of a new specific anti-TIP law are some of the challenges that lay ahead.

17. (SBU) The media response, however, left much to be desired. The lack of protection of the women's identities had a tangibly negative impact on the women themselves, making it much more difficult for them to re-integrate. We have already begun discussion with the National TIP Coalition and the GOCR on enhanced media training and outreach on TIP issues, and we plan to develop a clear media strategy over the coming months.

BRENNAN